

90205

THE ASSOCIATION BETWEEN OVERWEIGHT, SICKNESS ABSENCE AND
PRESENTEEISM AMONG MEN AND WOMEN

Heidi Janssens*, M.D., Ghent University, Els Clays, Ph.D., Ghent University, Annalisa Casini, Ph.D., Free University of Brussels, France Kittel, Ph.D., Free University of Brussels, Dirk De Bacquer, Ph.D., Ghent University, Lutgart Braeckman Ph.D., Ghent University.

The obesity epidemic has become a major concern in Western societies, not only from a medical and health care perspective, but also with respect to the severe socio-economic consequences. The association between overweight and absenteeism is well known. However, the relationship with presenteeism is less frequently studied and the results are rather mixed.

The aim of this study was to examine the relation between on the one hand overweight status and on the other hand productivity loss measured both by self-reported presenteeism and by objective sickness absence data in a Belgian workplace population based study.

The results are based on data from the Belstress III study. This study comprised 2983 middle-aged workers (54% women) from seven companies or public administrations across Belgium. Body Mass Index (BMI) was calculated as the self-reported weight divided by the squared self-reported height (kg/m^2). According to the International Classification of the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2004), a BMI between 25 kg/m^2 and 29.9 kg/m^2 is defined as overweight and a BMI $\geq 30 \text{ kg/m}^2$ is considered obesity. 45 underweight persons (BMI $< 18.5 \text{ kg/m}^2$) were excluded.

Presenteeism, socio-demographic data, work-related factors (Job Content Questionnaire) and health behaviors were assessed by means of a self-administered questionnaire. Presenteeism was dichotomized: persons who reported that they came working despite being ill during the past year for at least two times were categorized as showing presenteeism. The objective sickness absence data were collected prospectively during 12 months follow-up. Persons who were at least 10 days absent in the registered period, were classified as having high sickness absence duration. Logistic regression analysis was conducted with correction for socio-demographic factors, job demands, job control, social support and a number of health indicators. All analyses were conducted separately for both sexes.

In the male sample, 45% ($n=616$) and 11% ($n=146$) of the participants were respectively overweight and obese. Within the female population, 25% ($n=375$) overweight and 13% ($n=192$) obese workers were observed. High sickness absence duration was registered in 33% of the total study sample. Presenteeism was reported by 51% of the participants.

Univariate results showed that overweight and obesity in men were significantly and positively associated with presenteeism. In women however, this association was not significant. In contrast with this finding, overweight and obesity were significant predictors of high sickness absence duration only in women. In the male subjects, this relationship could only be demonstrated for the obese group. After adjusting for socio-demographic factors (age, educational level), lifestyle-related health risk factors (smoking, alcohol consumption, physical activity) and perceived job demands, job control and social support at work, the association between overweight status and presenteeism remained significant in men. After adjusting for the same variables, the relationship between overweight status and high sickness absence duration remained significant in women, while the relation between obesity and sickness absence in men disappeared.

The well-known association between overweight and sickness absence was confirmed among women in a middle-aged working population, but not in the male workers. Overweight and obese men reported higher rates of presenteeism in comparison with their normal weight colleagues and this even after adjusting for several possible confounders. This association could however not be confirmed in women.

These results suggest that the problem of overweight and obesity has different consequences for the professional productivity of men and women. Overweight and obese men were more prone to go working despite being ill, whereas women with overweight and obesity were more at risk for increased sickness absence duration. However, both behaviors imply a loss of productivity with severe economic consequences for the employer.

Taking into account that previous research proved presenteeism to be a risk factor for future sick leave, we hypothesize a delayed effect in men with regard to sickness absence duration. Data collected during a longer follow-up period might demonstrate higher rates of sickness absence among overweight and obese men. The present findings stress the importance of health promotion at the workplace, more specifically with regard to obesity and overweight prevention. Healthy lifestyles are likely to result in lower absenteeism and presenteeism, leading to socio-economic benefits for companies as well as the whole society.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR: Heidi Janssens, Department of Public Health, University Hospital-Block A(2), De Pintelaan 185, 9000 Ghent, Belgium.